

Off the Path of Typical:

12 Lessons from a Motherhood That Didn't Go as Planned

Introduction

"How many kids do you want?"

It seems like an easy question, almost like we have control over the answer. It is as if we imagine our families in our heads, and get exactly what we want. I always said I wanted four kids - two boys and two girls - or all boys. I always wanted to be a boy mom and avoid the dreaded "middle child syndrome."

I pictured myself as a mom, standing in the kitchen in a yellow and white 1950s-style dress. I love dresses and imagine wearing them, even as a mom, but always with cute flats. I still don't know how to walk in high heels. I would have some frilly cute apron on as I pull freshly baked chocolate chip cookies out of the oven. When my kids came home from school, I would run them to various activities. Maybe my daughter would have oboe lessons, and my son would go to soccer practice. I would work one day a week at a job I loved, not one I had to work at. On the weekends, we would head to the garage and have family band practice because I am a little punk rock at heart. One of the kids would have to be a good singer because I have terrible pitch, but I've always wanted to play the drums.

As it turned out, motherhood looks vastly different than the ideal I had in my head. Of my six pregnancies, I ended up with three boys; clearly, I have a middle child. Instead of music lessons and sports practice, I spend my days taking my kids to occupational therapy, speech therapy and neurologists. We don't have a punk rock band, and I've never learned how to play the drums like I hoped, but there are still cookies! I typically pull a batch of Pillsbury break-apart chocolate chip cookies out of the oven around nine pm, after the children are in bed. I pour two

tall glasses of ice-cold milk for my husband and me, and we enjoy our not-so-homemade cookies and milk in our sweats while watching comedies we have seen a hundred times. We then clink our glasses together, cheering the fact that we made it through another day.

I have been off the path of "typical" for the entirety of my motherhood experience: typical development, milestones, behaviors, after-school activities, conversations with other moms, and life. My oldest son, Owen, was diagnosed with autism and a receptive communication disorder when he was in the first grade. My middle son, Liam, was diagnosed with ADHD and anxiety in the second grade and, later, an autism diagnosis. My sweet baby, Jace, is autistic and primarily nonspeaking and labeled as medically complex because of his feeding disorder, asthma, and epilepsy. It seems like we add a new diagnosis to his chart each year! Through the course of my motherhood experience, I have also personally received labels of postpartum anxiety and depression, adjustment disorder, and coming to understand my own neurodivergence. My heart has ached endlessly, shattering into a million pieces until it has become something I could have never built on my own. It is different than I expected but more than I could have ever hoped for.

I started this journey on the same path as many of my family and friends but watched as my children strayed from the trail, stimmed, danced, and ran off into the woods. I wanted to stay on the easy path and feel and look like everyone else. I wanted the same for my children. I would beg, plead, bribe, and try to convince them to return to the easy road, but they were not changing; they were off on their path. It's when I stopped looking back at the paved path and started focusing on my children and who they are that I realized that they didn't need to change; I did. I could be what I thought the image of a good mother was, or I could be the best mother for my kids.

Even though I know I am on the right path for my kids, it can feel lonely in the thick of the forest. Finding support on the "typical path" is easy, but finding those in the brush and trees with us is more challenging. This is where I have had to search for my people. This is where God whispered to my soul, "Let me make more of you than you thought possible." This is the place of lonely nights, feeling abandoned, and quiet contemplation. It has become a sacred place.

If your journey with motherhood hasn't gone as planned, this book is for you! I hope you can see yourself in the lessons I have learned along the way and continue to learn. This isn't a story about triumph at the end of a journey; it's the messy middle. The refiner's fire. The quiet and the complicated. And, of course, there are still cookies here, too!

Lesson 1

Author and Finisher and Carriage Accidents

I have watched several documentaries and YouTube videos about Abraham Lincoln, but the one I watched the most was a video about his assassination. I had no idea that the plan was also to assassinate Vice President Andrew Johnson and Secretary of State William Seward. Johnson's assassin lost his nerve and got drunk instead of completing his assignment. (They still sentenced him to death for the assassination plan). The story of William Seward, Lincoln's secretary of state and one of Lincoln's closest friends, is fascinating.

Nine days before the assassination attempt, a carriage accident injured William Seward. He broke his arm and his jaw and the injuries were so severe that he ended up in a neck brace and bedridden. The night of the attack, Seward was stabbed several times in the face and neck, but his neck brace took the majority of the blows, and he survived.

I think about this story a lot, not only because I have watched a YouTube clip about it forty-seven times but because of its message. How many times have we experienced an event,

such as a carriage accident, that feels like a hindrance or burden or just plain unfair but turns out to be something we need to save our lives? When things don't go according to plan, I want to push against it. I love to plan and be in control. I have always had a plan for my life, but motherhood did not go according to plan.

I knew very little about the presidents of the United States, let alone elaborate assassination plots, until my oldest son, who is autistic, developed a special interest in presidents. Autistic individuals frequently develop special interests, including hobbies or an intense focus on specific subjects. A fascination with presidents began for Owen in the first grade during a math lesson when he asked his teacher who those funny-looking guys were on the money. When my kids develop an interest, I dive full force into it with them. We read books on presidents, watched YouTube videos, bought flashcards, and talked about presidents nonstop. I had to draw the line when my son asked if he could get a haircut like George Washington. I convinced him that the John F Kennedy would be a much better cut.

Owen's first-grade teacher was a fantastic man, working with autistic children for twenty-five-plus years. Every month, he put on a concert for the parents in his classroom. He had a small stage at the front of the room, and ten autistic boys would sit on the stage and sing the songs they learned for their parents and family. It was the most beautiful thing I had ever witnessed. Some kids sang loudly, some walked around, covering their ears, and others sat silently rocking to the music. These were my people! Owen was super into the musical performances. He howled like a werewolf during Halloween and knew every verse to the twelve days of Christmas. I was looking forward to attending the spring showcase and wondered what kind of songs the sweet boys would sing about spring or flowers.

I work as a school counselor, so I left for school before Owen did. Typically, his grandparents or a babysitter would get him ready in the morning, so getting a chance to peek into his world during the day was extra special. I arrived in the classroom and, to my surprise and horror, Owen wore a top hat and bowtie, dressed like Abraham Lincoln! Naturally, he had an Abraham Lincoln costume, but we absolutely did not wear it to school! I felt mortified. Who put him on the bus like this? Granted, he was in an autism class with a boy who wore a three-piece suit daily, another who refused to wear socks, and one boy who wore shorts every day of the year, even in the snow. I am sure Abraham Lincoln wasn't the strangest outfit to grace that classroom, but it wasn't what I expected that day. There he was, though, singing his heart out about transforming into a butterfly in a black coat and stovepipe hat.

When Owen was born, I would have never imagined my life full of president videos, special education meetings, and various therapies. That is the funny thing when you are young and in love. You talk about having a baby; you don't really talk about a lifetime commitment to a person you created. I never really thought about that baby growing up. I never thought about having a toddler. Or a child. Or a teenager. Or an adult. I never thought about the possibility of having a child who may need me forever and depend on me forever. That just wasn't a conversation we had when we talked about growing our family. Maybe other people have those conversations, but we didn't. It was a lot of "I love you; let's have a baby!" and never "Hey, let's really think about all the 8000 different scenarios that parenthood could throw at us." Maybe that's a good thing, or people would never think about having babies, and humans would stop being.

March 1 was my due date, but he was not ready. I tried all the tricks, but he still wasn't budging. This kid was already teaching me lessons on patience and timing! We scheduled an induction for March 8, and I felt satisfied knowing that he would come on that day.

I went into labor Friday night, March 4, and twelve hours later, I had our baby. During "March Madness," I remember conversing with my husband and the doctor about basketball, all while trying to get this rather large baby to make his grand entrance. He ended up getting stuck, and the old-school doctor used forceps to remove him. He had some breathing issues at the beginning, so they whisked him away. I sent my husband with him because I had watched too many baby-swapping stories. The doctor left. The nurses left. I was left alone with a Subway sandwich. I couldn't feel the lower half of my body, but I managed to bring the hospital tray to me and devoured the whole thing before my husband returned. It was his sandwich. We still laugh about that.

I feel like those moments right after birth were a foreshadowing of things to come for me. I felt like a whirlwind had surrounded me. People rushed everywhere to this son of mine and checked to make sure he was okay. Feeling helpless and asking, "Is everything okay? What's going on? What does he need? What can I do?" Over and over again. Lots of rushing. Lots of noise. Lots of unknown and then silence. I was all alone. I didn't fully understand what was going on and didn't know what to do, but I knew that was my baby, and I loved him unconditionally. Over the years, I have often felt caught up in this whirlwind, and I have asked what I can do and who can help. There are also many times that I have felt like everyone has left the metaphorical room, and I am lying there alone, still in pain from what I just experienced. Sometimes, I feel like I have forgotten who I was outside of this world of motherhood and caring for children with such high-demand needs. One thing that has never left me is the urgency to do

what is best for my baby, no matter what. That desire and ache in my heart that settled when I became a mother would build a home, take residence, and never leave again.

The next two years were filled with the chaos and uncertainty. The baby comes. You show off your baby. If you had a baby a decade ago, you blogged about it. Then things start to not go as planned. Feeding doesn't go as planned. This is your first baby, so, gosh, it must be you, right? What is wrong with you? You agonize, mourn, and hide. You feel like a failure.

Then, the milestones come. Oh, the baby rolled over! Write that in the baby book. He smiled! Baby book. He laughed! Baby book. First solid food? Baby book. You talk to your friends about how your baby rolled over.

"Oh, he did? How lovely! My kid is crawling already!"

Oh. Should my baby be crawling too? Back to the checkups. Back to the milestone checklists. Then you realize - you can't check off a lot of the milestones. It's nothing to worry about yet, so you go back home. More milestones to be had; fewer milestones being met. And slowly, you stop checking. You stop showing up to the parties. You stop talking about progress because your baby isn't making progress. You stop everything you were so excited about before because you don't understand why. Everyone is telling you it's okay; it's normal; it'll happen in time. But you slowly stop and don't even realize - you have left yourself alone.

What happened to my plan? What happened to my story? I am a writer of stories, and my story of motherhood was taking twists and turns that I didn't want! Why wasn't he talking? Why was he obsessed with just one toy and playing with it the same way over and over? Why could we only watch one episode of Mickey Mouse Clubhouse, and tantrums would ensue when we didn't? Why would he make sounds all day long but never coherent words? Why did I have to

make the exact same thing for lunch every day, on the same plate or he wouldn't eat at all? There are so many whys but not enough answers.

There is a scripture that says God is the *"author and finisher of our faith."* (see Hebrews 12:2) Did He have a plan for me? Was His story different than my story? Was this a “carriage accident” that was derailing my life or was it perhaps a catalyst to a life that was better than I could have ever written myself?